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ABSTRACT

The experience of a teacher confronted with implementing materials and approaches of the Iceland social studies curriculum project is narrated. These materials presumed a knowledge of developmental psychology and educational theories of Piaget, Kohlberg, Bloom, and Taba, translations of which are not readily available to Icelandic teachers. The paper stresses that implementation of any curricular change is a dynamic process, in which teachers use their own knowledge and backgrounds to adapt new materials to their situations. In order for teachers in Iceland to use the new curriculum, it had to be changed from its original intentions. Yet, despite the changes, it remained a program that altered social studies instruction from an emphasis on fact to one that uses a broader approach. It also improved teacher education. Even though the curriculum now in use is neither the old one or the new one proposed by the curriculum project, these changes will have a permanent impact on education in Iceland. (IS)

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# A TEACHER'S VIEW OF THE ICELANDIC SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM PROJECT: RESPONSE TO WOLFGANG EDELSTEIN

by

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Wolfgang Edelstein has described how the social studies curriculum project in Iceland was swept away in a winter storm of neo-fundamental ideologies. While Edelstein's account is personal, it touches on issues that are important to all of us that were involved in the project; I for one, was proud to be part of it as a practicing teacher. Edelstein appears to assume that the social studies curriculum was adopted and implemented as intended by the developers. While I accept Edelstein's overall thesis, I want to respond to this particular assumption. I will argue that the social studies curriculum was not implemented in Icelandic classrooms the way Edelstein assumes. The social studies curriculum material is found in most classrooms at the elementary level but without the all important developmental structure.

You will recall that theories from developmental psychology are central to the new social studies curriculum. In Edelstein's words, the content is "peripheral" and comes from several disciplines, some of which are new in the educational context in Iceland. There was no such thing as "social studiss" previously. Infused into the developmental structure of the new social studies curriculum are Taba's structure of curriculum development and Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives. The end product is an elegant and sophisticated model of a process oriented curriculum dependent upon developmentally structured activities. The idea of a developmentally structured curriculum was, as Edelstein says, "a leap in our ability to think about education." This was problematic, in my view, because the addition of

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structure without content, was too much to comprehend for many Icelandic teachers unless they know Piaget, Kohlberg, Bloom and Taba, which most of them do not. It is important to note here that the works of these scholars are not available in Icelandic, with the exception of a small primer on Piaget's developmental theories.

Edelstein's assumption is that the curriculum was adopted, implemented and incorporated as intended. I am sure that nearly all schools in Iceland bought the social studies curriclum materials. But mere possession of curriculum materials is not enough because the governing structure must also enter the classroom to guide the process by which the materials are used. Successful implementation requires the teachers' understanding the structure of the curriculum, and they must have some awareness of the theories that produced the materials. Furthermore, the teachers must agree with the idea of the active learner, as promoted by the social studies curriculum. An important point was that the developers assumed that there would be modifications in the implementation process. Most of the materials are what Walker (1979) calls "unfinished curriculum." Such an approach to curriculum development gives the teacher the ideas and resources but leaves it to him or her to come up with a plan of how to teach.

I learned about the new social studies curriculum materials at an in-service summer course. This course was popular among teachers in Iceland because it was recognized that there was more to the course than teaching social studies. There was a heavy



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emphasis on teaching methods such as, brainstorming, questioning strategies, group work, project work, enquiry and group discussions. There was some theory too. For instance, I can still remember the session when we were introduced to the structure of the social studies curriculum. There was a flow chart with boxes, words and sentences, and lines going in all directions. Somewhere in this scheme was the spiral showing how concepts were re visited over and over again. This was my first introduction to the structure of the new Icelandic social studies curriculum. I remember that at the time, I was puzzled over the connection between this grand plan and the exciting materials.

When it came to teaching the curriculum materials, I took an integrated approach, which was based on my experience as a teacher in Britain. In Iceland, I taught language (reading and writing), physical education (games and dance drama), art, craft, and music as part of the social studies. I was never able to integrate math into the social studies curriculum because I was much too dependent on the math textbook for its own structure. Even though I integrated other subjects with the social studies curriculum, and even though I used the social studies materials I did not understand its structure, and consequently I taught it like I taught other things. The end product was more a general integrated curriculum, emphasizing the different ways human beings express themselves, than a social studies curriculum. Other teachers in my school changed the social studies curriculum, adapting it to their own classrooms and their own educational framework. The annual field trip now became a part of the social studies curriculum, the old textbooks were replaced



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by new colorful books. In some instances the project books were used as the old textbooks where you start on page one and progress page by page to the end. Like myself, most teachers continued doing what they had done in the past, only slightly differently.

To view my experience and that of my fellow teachers in a theoretical perspective, I now want to turn briefly to research on planned change. Berman et al. (1979) argue that the adoption of an innovation, or what they call initiation, is only the first stage in a long and complex process which also involves implementation and incorporation. They define the second stage, implementation, to be the phase when plans are transformed into practice. In this stage they emphasize that all innovations undergo change. The third stage is incorporation where the innovation becomes an integral part of the environment. In their research, Berman and associates identify a process called "a mutation phenomenon." It is the process by which an innovation adapts to the situation. This adaption is positive for if there is no change in the original plan, then there will be no implementation or incorporation.

My teaching of the Icelandic social studies curriculum represents one case of implementation and incorporation. I want to suggest that the changes I made when implementing the curriculum were mutation beyond recognition. The end product was a "hybrid" different from both the social studies curriculum as planned by the developers and different from what I had done before. Angus (1984) has studied how knowledge is mediated and



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supplementated at every stage from the scholar to the classroom. That is, changes must have occurred when the social studies curriculum materials were taught at the in-service course, and when the teachers used the materials in their classrooms. Unfortunately, there has been no research dealing with the social studies curriculum as it is implemented and incorporated, which might be relevant to the issue of mediation and supplementation. Among the curriculum developers, the interest was there but not the manpower. The priority was to get the materials to the schools.

By now, you are probably wondering, what all the commotion is about? What are the neo-fundamentalists reacting to if there is no social studies curriculum as intended?"

In spite of the picture I have drawn of the social studies curriculum it has made important contributions to education in two areas. The first contribution is that the social studies curriculum project facilitated change in educational discourse in Iceland by introducing new vocabulary and new ideas. We have a new education law, reports from commissions, and curriculum guides promoting child centered and integrated curriculum. Teachers and inspectors are talking about "starting with the child" and "the seamless cloak of knowledge." This kind of reform movement is well described by Cuban (1979). He uses the metaphor of a hurricane sweeping across the water in describing the impact of the reform movements in schools. The turmoil caused by the hurricane on the surface is analogues to the controversies over curriculum ideas. Under the surface there is agitated motion but not of the magnitude as above. This is



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analogues to revisions in courses and textbooks. Deeper down at the bottom of the sea, all is quiet. The hurricane has not displaced anything out of its natural order; the hurricane of reform has not "disturbed" what goes on in classrooms. Cuban is careful to point out the limitations of such a metapohor, however, for he maintains that reform movements have had some impact in the past on student learning. We certainly felt the force of the hurricane last winter in Iceland. While the analogy of a hurricane has its limitations, it is important to note that hurricanes come and go, but teachers stay.

The second contribution of the social studies curriculum to the education scene in Iceland is its influence on teacher education. I experienced the social studies curriculum more as a program for teacher education than as a curriculum project. The emphasis at the summer course was more on new pedagogical practices than on the content of the curriculum. In the United States, a similar curriculum project which also had a heavy emphasis on teacher education, was shelfed because the National Science Foundation did not want to support a curriculum project that emphasized teacher education more than content (Shulman 1985).

It seems to me that a curriculum project like the Icelandic social studies project is like a theory of learning in the sense that it provides structure for ideas about learning and teaching. Theories are important to teachers, not as prescriptions, but as sources of ideas. In my case, the social studies curriculum project and the in-service course, were important sources for



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coming up with interesting ideas for classroom activities. Liberman (1982) suggests that when this happens, the new ideas may be reshaped and augmented without special concerns for the preservation of the logic of their content. What came through on the summer course I attended, was the idea of the active learner and the teacher as facilitator.

A conflict over learning theory occured in the implementation of the Icelandic social studies curriculum. The idea of the active learner caused conflict among Icelandic teachers which lead to polarization among teachers. We had, and still have, traditional vs open education camps entrenched in our elementary schools. The social studies curriculum and the in-service course, emphasizing a bold break from tradition, fuelled and escalated that polarization. The conflict among the teachers gradually spilled over and spread into the communities around the schools. Parents became aware of that learning was not exactly the same as when they were at school, and also that teachers were not unanimously supporting the changes. Their uneasiness gradually built up because the system does not provide much opportunity to defuse the situation that is; for parents to express their concerns.

I knew that the parents of my students were not totally convinced that the learning I was promoting was the "right kind." A mother said to me during parent conferences in the spring of 1981:

> The children are now 10 years old and they should be learning the subjects. You are not teaching them about anything.

I knew she was talking about the social studies curriculum, but I



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was puzzled and asked what she meant:

> Like learning that Paris is the capital of France, that sort of thing,

she answered. In some ways the mother was right; it is important to know certain facts. For a country like Iceland, the identity of the nation rests partly in the sagas, which are tales from the past. People feel it is important that students should know facts about their heritage. Teacher dedicated to the reform movement rejected the idea of teaching facts for facts sake. That view still holds, but we should be able to find a meaningful way to teach facts.

What are we to make of Wolfgang Edelstein's discussion of the rise and fall of the Icelandic social studies curriculum project in Iceland? His reflections have wider implication than educational reform in Iceland, it also concerns issues of reasons and power in contmporary society. Specifically, for me as a teacher having taught the Icelandic social studies curriculum, the following conclusions seem relevant: (1) the curriculum materials have not yet been implemented as intended and assumed by Edelstein, and (2) the curriculum project has made an important contribution to education discourse in Iceland, and greatly improved teacher education.

Because of Edelstein's analysis of the rise and fall of the social studies curriculum in Iceland, we now better understand the complexities of curriculum reform. We have learned a lesson and will be better prepared next time, because hurricanes do not last long. Once the initial storm passes, fortunately, we can get on with the business of educational reform. As a closing



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note, I would like to paraphrase Bruner and say: "Wolfgang, this is the way it begins, this is the way it always begins."

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